

## **Extraterrestrials and Religious Questions**

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The practice of hypothesizing and speculating about extraterrestrial intelligence is not restricted to scientists and science fiction writers. Clergy and theologians also hypothesize and speculate about extraterrestrial intelligence, and even about extraterrestrial religions. [See O'Meara's "The Salvation of Extraterrestrials," Huffington Post (July 16, 2012) and "Christian Theology and Extraterrestrial Intelligent Life," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 3-30.]

### **Extraterrestrial Religions**

Human experiences indicate that freedom and high levels of intelligence yield religious questions. Hence, the possibility of highly intelligent extraterrestrials suggests the possibility of extraterrestrial religions.

Identifying the generic features of human religions may tell us a little about possible

extraterrestrial religions. Among humans, three topics appear constant and basic in all religions: (1) the knowing person, (2) the person's relationship to the spiritual dimension, and (3) the person's relationship to moral/ethical problems of violence, immorality, and personal destructiveness. This triad is a good initial approach to speculating about extraterrestrial religions.

### **ET Intelligences and Religion in the Past**

In recent years a few religious persons have expressed hostility to the idea of extraterrestrial intelligences. For instance, in *Confessions of an Alien Hunter: A Scientist's Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence* (2009) Seth Shostak reports religiously motivated hostile responses to the scientific search for extraterrestrial intelligence [SETI]. Nevertheless, a long view of Christian religious traditions reveals many opposite responses. In *Vast Universe* (2012) I argued, "For over two millennia religious thinkers and philosophers have had ideas about a wider universe and other races of intelligence" (p. 63).

Long-ago religious thinkers favoring the idea of extraterrestrial intelligences include: *Origen* (ca. 185-ca. 254), an Alexandrian church preacher, held that a vast number of free "intelligences" and creatures were created to enjoy creation with the divine Creator, and that the universe was filled with rational-spiritual beings with powers and responsibilities beyond anything human. *Guillaume de Vaurouillon* (ca. 1392-1463), a Franciscan teacher at the University of Paris, held that the Creator created an infinity of worlds. Others

advancing the idea of a plurality of inhabited worlds included *Nicholas of Cusa* (1401-64), a church cardinal, theologian, mathematician, and astronomer; and two Dominicans—*Tomasso Campanella* (1568-1634) and *Giordano Bruno* (1548-1600).

From the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, according to research by Michael Crowe, there were many religious thinkers and philosophers who presumed that the universe teems with life, and that there are intelligent beings throughout the cosmos. Believers in extraterrestrial intelligences included Thomas Paine, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, Joseph Smith, and Ellen White (one of the founders of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church). Crowe noted that by 1917 more than 140 books dealing with the question of extraterrestrial life had appeared. By the twentieth century, however, the confidence prevalent a century earlier that the universe teems with life had seriously diminished. [See the following by Michael Crowe: “A History of the Extraterrestrial Life Debate,” *Zygon* 32 (1977); *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate 1750-1900: The Idea of a Plurality of Worlds from Kant to Lowell* (1986); and *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate, Antiquity to 1915: A Source Book* (2008).]

In the twentieth century, important theologians like the Protestant *Paul Tillich* and the Roman Catholic *Karl Rahner* affirmed the likelihood of intelligent extraterrestrials. In his three-volume *Systematic Theology* (1957) Paul Tillich deliberated about how to understand the meaning of religious words and rituals “in the light of the immensity of the universe” (vol. 2, p. 95f). Tillich saw no reason for claiming that planet Earth is the only place where religion with revelation and incarnation might exist. Similarly, Karl

Rahner saw no reason why evolutionary processes would not produce intelligences elsewhere in the cosmos. [See Rahner's teaching about purgative processes between death and heaven on other planets in *On the Theology of Death* (1961), and see his "Christology within an Evolutionary View," *Theological Investigations* 5 (1966).]

### **ET Intelligences and Religion Today**

Contemporary clergypersons and theologians are continuing the longstanding practice of speculating about extraterrestrials. For instance, inquiries into the theological significance of ideas about extraterrestrial life are advanced in "Exotheology: Speculations on Extraterrestrial Life," a chapter in *Science, Theology, and Ethics* (2003) by Ted Peters. [And see Ted Peters, *The Evolution of Terrestrial and Extraterrestrial Life: Where in the World is God?* (2008); and see Thomas Berry, "The Universe as Cosmic Liturgy," in *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth* (2009), 115.]

### **Relational Theologies Embrace ET Intelligences**

The theologian Walter Kasper in *The God of Jesus Christ* (1984) writes that, "Neither the substance of the ancients nor the person of the moderns is ultimate, but rather relation is the primordial category of reality" (p. 290). And in *The One in the Many: A Contemporary Reconstruction of the God-World Relationship* (2001) theologian Joseph A. Bracken argues for understanding the divine trinity and the universe in terms of continuously emerging relationships. Various relational theologies embrace the idea of

extraterrestrial intelligences.

Perhaps there lies ahead in Earth's future not only the knowledge of individual planets with their societies but also an awareness of galactic communality. Clusters of planets could share progress in science and art. The likelihood of extraterrestrials, star-friends, star-companions cannot but modify mind and art, existence and technology on Earth. They will make us think differently about who we are, and about what it means to be intelligent and creative.

Like a theme arising from a large orchestra with a crescendo, the cosmos resounds with the motif of "More": more life rather than decline and death, and more community rather than isolated individuals. Astronomers, astrophysicists, mathematicians, exobiologists, experts in technology, theologians, novelists, and stellar photographers, all speak in the conversation between science and religion, and all contribute to exploring the cosmos. Already technologically advanced civilizations may be communicating with each other over vast distance. And if we succeed in joining the conversation, we will discover more life, more art, more science, and more insight.

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